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School Of The Americas Closes

By Reuters

FORT BENNING, Ga. — The Army's controversial school for Latin American military personnel, bowing to pressure from critics who called it a training ground for dictators, torturers and assassins, has shut its doors.

The School of the Americas, whose more than 63,000 alumni include former dictators Manuel Noriega of Panama and Leopoldo Galtieri of Argentina, Haitian coup leader Raoul Cedras and Salvadoran death squad organizer Roberto D'Aubuisson, will be replaced by a new school with a new curriculum.

Standing on the steps of the faded pink building on Friday, Army Secretary Louis Caldera defended the school's work and reputation, even as he admitted its closure was a concession to critics.

"Some of you and your representatives in Congress could not even abide by the name of this School of the Americas itself and said that no amount of reform of this institution could ever redeem it in your eyes," he said. "Today you can rejoice that the school is closed."

The House approved plans this year to close the school after demands from a number of politicians. However, the school will reopen in January as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

The new school will teach law enforcement personnel and civilians as well as military personnel. Caldera said it will be a place where human rights courses will be prevalent.

"Do you truly believe that an American school of our U.S. armed forces located on American soil would not reflect our most deeply held values?" he asked.

At the same time, Caldera said the critics who called the old school a place for assassins misunderstood its mission. He said that at no time did the school teach torture tactics or train dictators.

"Any soldier in Latin America who had even the most remote connection to the School of the Americas, who has ever committed a human rights violation, did so in spite of the training they received at the School of the Americas and not because of it," Caldera said.

"This movement has not been fooled by the name change," said Roy Bourgeois, founder of the School of Americas Watch activist group, which has staged massive protests at Fort Benning over the years.

"This is not a human rights academy," he said. "This is a military school where soldiers learn combat."

Bourgeois said his group will continue to hold protests at the school and keep pressing lawmakers in Washington to shut it down.

For 38 years, the academy was based in Panama at Fort Gullick, overlooking the Atlantic entrance of the Panama Canal. It was relocated to Georgia in 1984 under the terms of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties and had until recently survived efforts by Democrats in Congress to cut off its funding.